

# Alabama Girls Technical Institute Bulletin

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Commencement Address

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# The Four Aims of Education

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An Address Delivered by George Petrie, Ph. D., Prof.  
History and Latin, Dean Academic Faculty Alabama  
Polytechnic Institute Before the Alabama Girls Tech-  
nical Institute on Commencement Day, May 23, 1911.

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Young ladies of the graduating class (this is your day, so I address you first), other ladies and gentlemen, if after the brilliant speeches to which you have listened during this commencement and the delightful occasions in which you have so successfully taken part, my words this morning shall seem to you prosy and my tongue halting, I pray you to bear with me patiently because of what I represent. For I have the honor today to be the spokesman of a college wherein are seven hundred young men—seven hundred handsome, talented, desirable young men. I bear their greetings to you, and their best wishes for success to this sister institution for technical instruction in Alabama. Some of them have sent special messages, very special messages, which I shall be happy to deliver in person if you will only come forward and identify them.

There is no disguising the fact that I am a teacher by profession, and this time of the year I am more in the habit of giving examinations than of making speeches. So I thought that this morning, if it is agreeable to you, I would just give an examination. Therefore, without more ado, I shall state the questions—or rather the question, for there will be only one question, although there are four answers. I know that you are tired in body and weary in mind, so I have written out the four answers as well as the question. I thought that I would read you my paper, and let you play teacher and grade it. And I would suggest that you pay very earnest attention, because if you do, who knows but the teachers here may adopt the plan regularly instead of the even more terrible written examination?

The question that I propose is this: "*What is an Education?*" Before we proceed to discuss my four answers, I wish to give you two cautions.

(1) First, I am not speaking merely of that little piece of education that we get in the school room. Education means far more than that. For weal of for woe, it goes on all the time. School time comes, and school time goes, but like Tennyson's brook, education goes

on forever. In college, out of college; at home, on the street; summer, and winter; by day, by night; while we are awake, and sometimes while we are asleep—always it goes on. You may close your school and proclaim a three months' vacation; but your education does not stop. By the seashore, in the mountains, on the farm, in the moonlight, the process goes resistlessly on. You might as well try to stop the revolution of the earth or its circling around the sun. It began long ago, when clinging fast to your mother's hand you made your first desperate efforts to walk. It will reach its zenith when you in turn hold a soft little hand in yours and guide other small feet through the same absorbing task; for your mothers will tell you that the raising of children is the greatest of all educations. It will not be ended until gentle hands once more guide your faltering footsteps, then softly close your eyes, and you appear before the great Teacher for your final examination.

So that really, young ladies, this happy occasion is not inaptly termed your "commencement", for your education is scarcely more than begun.

(2) The other caution that I wish to give is that with all of us education is definitely limited by things over which we have little control. I mean that we can get only what education our circumstances permit. Sickness, poverty, stupid leadership may handicap us terribly. To those of you, if there are any, who have suffered in this way, let me commend the beautiful lines of a little poem. A poor weaver in the far East had toiled all day in spite of sickness and failure. His work was slow and much of it poor, but on he worked despondent and weary.

"In bitter pain and heartbreak  
He wove till his work was done,  
And the master of all the weavers  
Came at the set of sun;  
Then, as the others thronged him,  
Showing their patterns rare,  
The master turned to him who had failed,  
And laid a hand on his hair.

" 'Well done, well done, my weavers,  
And rich shall your guerdons be.  
But of all your beauteous patterns  
This one best pleaseth me;  
For the red of courage and the gold of faith  
Are woven whenever a man  
Looks in the face of failure  
And does the best that he can' ".

Sometimes we are limited by our own lack of strength, bodily or mental; sometimes the trouble is that we have no opportunity. A recent writer tells us of a man who died and went to Heaven. After a while his curiosity overcame his timidity, and he began to ask questions. "Where are the great generals"? he inquired. A group of men with military bearing was pointed out to him. There were Lee, and Jackson, and others of whom he had heard. But right in the center of the group was a little one-legged fellow to whom they were all doing reverence. "Who is he"? he asked. "Oh", they replied, "he was a little, lame shoemaker who lived in the backwoods. He never was in a war, and never had a chance to fight. In life he had no opportunity. But we know that of all men he had the greatest military genius".

I sometimes wonder how many of the world's greatest poets have lived their lives and passed away in silence, because no circumstances developed their talents or called forth their song.

The road to education then is bounded on either side by a stone wall. On one side is the definite limitation set by our own weakness bodily and mental; on the other side is the equally definite limitation set by our circumstances. But between them the road is a broad one; in fact it is more like an open plain, and over it we may travel at liberty, and our progress will depend on our own wisdom and energy. Let us then consider what our course should be over this long, open plain of possibility.

Now I return to the question for this examination, and state it a little differently: "*What is the purpose of an education*"? I shall present my four answers to this question by telling you what I believe should be the *four aims of an education*.

1. The first aim is one that I should have hesitated to mention if I had been speaking fifty years ago, because then few people thought that education had anything to do with it. But today I am sure that every one in this audience will agree with me in the statement that one of the very first of its aims should be to *help us make a living*. Some men always have professed a scorn for bread and butter, as well as for clothes and houses. The old Greek, Diogenes, lived in a tub, and when a great man asked what he could do for him, replied, "Get out of my light". In the middle ages some men lived in caves, and thought that they were better spiritually for it, just as today some sleep out of doors, and think they are better physically for it. But most of us believe that happiness, and what is more important, usefulness, requires a reasonable amount of food, clothing, and housing; and that the first



demand of any system of education is that it should help us get this. And our demand is more insistent if we have some one dependent on us—a mother, a brother, a sister, or somebody else's sister.

The spread of this idea in America has been marvelous. Everywhere we see manual-training schools, business schools, trade schools, industrial schools, technical schools. Their development has been the most striking feature of our day, and no less rapid has been the growth of the popular belief in the importance of school training. When our fathers were boys those who had to make a living often left school early, and went directly into business, because education was considered a luxury, and they could not afford the time for it. Today the boy, or the girl, who has to make a living is coming to feel that he of all men must get his full training in order that he may be sure of that living.

2. The second aim of education seems to me equally obvious, yet in spite of our recent progress it is still too often neglected. I mean *vigor of body and mind*. We all know the old-fashioned type of scholar: slender, hollow-chested, thin-legged, with flabby muscles and a weary, worried look. He was a mere remnant from a badly managed life. Often his mind, like his body, had lost its vigor and its originality. Manly vitality and aggressiveness had vanished, and their place was poorly filled by a memory stored with a vast collection of facts, many of which were useless and most of which were undigested. He was a caricature; and as we now realize, a needless one. He was a part of a one-sided system that sadly neglected the student's health. He was typical of the days when people cared nothing about the heating or the ventilation of school houses, or about the lighting of the rooms or the comfort of the benches—of the days when recess was regarded as a painful concession to youthful restlessness, when the playground looked after itself, and a gymnasium was as unheard of as a swimming pool or a shower bath.

Modern progress is changing all this. We now recognize that no boy or girl can afford to sacrifice health for schooling. The recess period is coming to be regarded as the most important one in the day—the hour when the weary human instrument is retuned, when the steam engine of human flesh and blood is refilled with fuel, when body and mind regain their vigor and poise, and are made ready once more for work. We are getting back to the Greek idea, and the playground and the athletic field are coming to be the center of school life; and with this change is coming a new responsibility for the proper direction of this side of our education. Much of this must rest of course on the school authorities; but much also must rest on the pupils. Unless they

can be brought to take a constant pride in the health and strength of their bodies, in being in what the English call "good condition", no gymnasium, no athletic field, can develop in them that vigor and stamina which mean so much in the struggle of life, and which is one of the best safeguards against many forms of dissipation that beset the young and quickly sap their strength.

But education must aim at *mental vigor* as well as *physical*. And while this is dependent in many ways on bodily health and strength, it does not come automatically with them. The mind, like the body, requires for its development exercise, exercise, exercise. The only way to get a trained mind is to train it, and this means persistent work. I fear that this persistent training of the mind is not the strong point of our modern school system. We have thoroughly waked up to the importance of determining what the student shall study; but in our eagerness to bring into the curriculum new and useful topics, we often overlook the importance of learning to work steadily and persistently at one thing until it is mastered. That is what makes mental fibre and vigor.

Just here let me give a word of warning, which may seem out of place in speaking to young women. It is this: the most important characteristic of mental vigor is independence. Therefore in urging upon you the importance of mental vigor, I am urging women to be independent. Now I am not enthusiastic about female suffrage, but I am so about independence of thought for women as well as for men, because I do not see how there can be any other kind of thought that is worth the name. Are you thinking when you passively accept the thoughts of another. The good book says "prove all things, hold fast that which is good". That is thinking. I say this because I know how prone we all are to imitate writers or teachers who impress us, and because I believe that our modern methods and large classes often fail to develop properly the individuality of the pupils. Nineteen centuries ago there was in Palestine the greatest of all schools because it had the greatest of all teachers. It only lasted about three years, and there were only about a dozen regular pupils; yet it revolutionized the world of pedagogics as well as the world of religion. In no other respect was the teaching in that school more remarkable than in the wonderful way in which it developed each pupil's personality. Each was made a new man, yet each remained himself. Peter was Peter still, and John was still John.

3. The third aim of education should be to *increase our ability to do things*. A decent living is important, and so is vigor of body

and mind; but these are only a preparation for the work of life. If education stops here, it is a failure. It must also develop initiative, aggressiveness, executive talent. In a word, it must train us to use our strength of body and mind so as to do something worth doing.

In the old days an education was regarded as something complete in itself, an accomplishment. It was a sort of polish, a finishing touch, a garment put on to make one more beautiful, a mental cap and gown to wear on academic occasions. Today we are getting a different conception and think of it as a training for achievement, a something whose value is to be measured by what it enables us to do. In our estimate of it we are swinging back to the Biblical doctrine: "By their fruits ye shall know them". As we train our armies not merely to make a fine show on parade, but to win battles; so we are coming to realize that we must train our young men and women not for display, but to win in the most serious of all battles, the battle of life.

We admire in men the capacity to do things. Our opinions may differ on the policies advocated by Grover Cleveland and by Theodore Roosevelt, but we take off our hats to them as men of action. One of the reasons that we revere the names of Lee and Jackson is that in the face of tremendous odds they did things that can not be forgotten. When we finish the Panama canal, I believe we shall take more pride in the difficulties that we overcame than in the fact that we had the money to make it.

To us who are Alabamians this conception appeals peculiarly. We have done and are doing great things. We are justly proud of the visible progress that our state has made in the great coal and iron regions around Birmingham; and this very week we are looking further back and are celebrating with loving remembrance the bi-centenary of that other great Alabama city, Mobile. All this is well. No one rejoices at it more than I. But we should remember that great achievements in art, in science, in literature, in education, in the cause of religion, have as real a value as great cities and canals and business enterprises. And we should see to it that our educational system should recognize the fact that in all these lines true training should aim not merely at a passive appreciation, but at an active productivity. We must not merely vibrate to other people's music; we must learn to make our own.

I believe that every school ought to establish a portrait gallery for the pictures of its alumni who have shown the value of their education by making good with it. Here I would hang the portraits of those who have become noted scholars, famous preachers, lawyers, or



doctors, successful business men or women, eminent writers, painters, or men of science. Such a visible honor roll would be a constant evidence to younger people that education does lead to something, that it does train men and women to do things.

4. This brings me to the fourth aim of education, which is to *put us in touch with the world about us.*

This is in direct opposition to the old idea that a college ought to be a sort of monastery or nunnery, in whose academic shades the student foreswore the world and its baser cares in order to devote himself to the chaste pursuit of learning. It seems natural enough that our colleges should go through this stage in their development, when one recalls that so many large universities grew out of monasteries.

But our modern schools are rapidly getting away from this idea. Life in them is becoming more and more like life in the big world. Indeed, our college boys and girls have outrun the college authorities in this progress, and have built up a little world of their own between the joints of the old institutions. Their fraternities, their clubs, their contests—literary, athletic, social and political—their steps toward self-government, have of course created many new problems in school management, but they are also furnishing an invaluable training in the ways of the world, for which the pupils would seek in vain in the class room.

If we are to get in touch with the world, we must cultivate the art of adapting ourselves to it; and an education that fits us for life must give us an adaptable spirit, an elastic and pliable mind, an understanding broad enough to sympathize with many types of men, a heart kindly enough to feel an interest in their problems and cares, and a spirit manly enough to lend them a helping hand. I do not know a better evidence of a really liberal education than just this broad, hearty, active sympathy.

If we do not insist on this aim in our education, I do not know what is to become of our attempt to build up a great nation. We may sing patriotic songs all day and wave flags until our arms ache, but if we do not train our citizens so that one class can understand and sympathize with another, and one section perceive the standpoint of another, sooner or later our country will go to pieces. We can not settle our race problem, or our labor problem, on any other basis. To come still closer home, this broad-minded understanding and sympathy is the real basis of all happiness in our homes between husband and wife, parent and child.

This education is not to be obtained lightly in a few years of

schooling. It is a life work, and is the chief study in that larger college which you young ladies are today entering—the university of life. I would urge upon you its importance. You may gain wealth; you may win fame; you may find happiness; but with all these life will still be a disappointment, unless you are useful. And to be useful to the world one must get in close touch with it—not with its frivolities and its shallow wickedness, but with the great currents of human nature that give to life its meaning. Gravitation and electricity are very powerful in their way, but the real forces that determine and sway our lives are the affection of friend for friend, the devotion of a woman to her son, the love of country, the passion for right, the high courage to fight for it, and the still higher courage to give up for it the things that lie near the heart, the tender associations that cling about the memory of home, the joy of vigorous health, the exhilaration of success, the chastening sorrow of pain and suffering, the depression of failure, the terrible gloom that follows the loss of those with whom our life has been closely knit.

These are the simplest things in life and the strongest. They can not be seen or touched, but they are the most actual and real things in it, and the most unchangeable. They are the same in all ages and in all lands, amidst the noise of the city and the quiet of the country. They are the very essence of human existence; and he who would be of service to his fellow men, must have his heart trained to respond to them. Men's tongues may differ and their thoughts may clash, but he whose heart can speak this universal language of human nature, can enter the brotherhood of man.

The Roman poet caught a glimpse of this idea and exclaimed, "Nothing human is foreign to me". Shakespeare perceived it and wrote of "the touch of nature that makes the whole world kin". Burns felt its profound truth amidst the artificial distinctions of modern life and cried out from his heart, "A man's a man for all that".

This is the wonderful thing sometimes called Humanism, which again and again in the world's history has come to rescue us from materialism and selfishness. Years ago Solomon in his weary search for wisdom, surrounded by men who were seeking wealth and power, caught a glimpse of it and exclaimed, "With all thy getting get understanding". Centuries later Jefferson caught another vision of it and gave us his glorious dream of a government which should rest not on accidental distinctions of birth or position, but on the fundamental equality of men. A greater than either of them saw more clearly than

both of them the essentially spiritual nature of this divine humanism and said, "God is your father, and all ye are brethren".

This then finally is culture. Its secret lies not in the new study of science, nor in the old study of literature; not in artistic education, nor in industrial, nor yet in technical. All these are good, each in its place. True culture may be found with any of them, or it may be the one thing still lacking in the young man who otherwise has great educational possessions. An ability to make a living is necessary, and all of us ought to be taught it, but it is not culture in this sense. A sound mind in a sound body should be sedulously cultivated, but even taken together they do not make up the culture of which I speak. An ability to do things is our great American virtue, but though a man be able to move mountains and have not charity, he is become as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. The real culture to which I refer, the great ideal of our life's education, is just this spirit of charity—this open-minded sympathy with all the world. This is the new birth into the kingdom where all men are equal because they are brethren. This is the great uplifting spirit of real education which gives to science its usefulness, to literature its meaning, to art its appeal, and which unites the old academic and the modern technical education in the common service of mankind.

